

Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve: the first fifty years

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INTRODUCTION

On 4 December 2012, the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve in West Central Scotland reached its first half century. Events leading up to the establishment of the reserve are slowly being forgotten with time, so that the main objective of this paper is to set down why the area was chosen and how its protected status was brought about. A brief account of the reserve's subsequent management and wildlife recording follows, concluding with a timeline of significant dates in the reserve's fifty year history (Appendix 1).

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES

The concept of creating a network of nature reserves representing all the major wildlife habitats, plant and animal communities in Britain goes back over a hundred years, but initially little progress was made in Scotland (Sheail, 1976). The move to establish nature reserves north of the border gathered momentum with the publication in 1949 of the final report by the Scottish Wildlife Conservation Committee under the chairmanship of Professor James Ritchie of Edinburgh University. Charged with advising the Scottish National Parks Committee on wildlife matters, the Ritchie Committee produced a list of recommended sites as nature reserves to be acquired through purchase or by agreement with the landowners. In Central Scotland the committee favoured the Aberfoyle area, recommending the sheltered eastern end of Loch Ard as a National Park Reserve (Fig. 1), together with the relatively undisturbed peatland of Gartrenich Moss on the Carse of Stirling as a subsidiary Nature Conservation Area (HMSO, 1949).

Although the Scottish Wildlife Conservation Committee showed preference for the Upper Forth, other eyes were firmly fixed on Loch Lomondside only a few kilometres to the west. For the post-war *Clyde Regional Plan 1946* (Abercrombie & Matthew, 1949), the compilers had turned to the Natural History Society of Glasgow to nominate wildlife sites worthy of protection within the boundaries of the plan. For diversity of habitat and opportunities for research, Loch Lomond and surrounds headed the Society's list (Cameron, 1946). Loch Lomondside's potential for research was also highlighted with the opening of a field station by the



Fig 1. For its aquatic and emergent vegetation, Loch Ard was the choice as a National Park Reserve by the Scottish Wildlife Conservation Committee.

University of Glasgow in 1946 to facilitate on-site freshwater studies (Slack, 1957). In addition, counts organised by the Wildfowl Trust showed that the shallow water and marshes around the south-east corner of the loch held wintering ducks and geese in regionally significant numbers (Atkinson-Willes, 1973), in particular being one of only three localities in Britain where the rapidly declining population of bean geese *Anser fabalis* still occurred (Boyd, 1963).

As it turned out, any choice to be made between the Upper Forth Valley and Loch Lomondside became academic when the government of the day rejected both National Parks and National Park Reserves for Scotland. The government did however accept another recommendation made by the Ritchie Committee, which was the setting-up of a representative series of National Nature Reserves throughout the UK to be administered by a biological or wildlife service. Founded by Royal Charter in March 1949, this service to be known as The Nature Conservancy declared its first National Nature Reserve in Britain – Beinn Eighe in Wester Ross – two years later (Anon, 1959).

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY ON LOCH LOMONDSIDE

The newly formed Nature Conservancy's involvement with Loch Lomondside began with the notification of a series of geological and biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the

region as early as 1951. But what especially focussed the organisation's attention on Loch Lomond were planning applications for house building on the well wooded islands of Inchcailloch and Torrinch, together with notification that the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board was investigating the hydro-electric potential of the Mar Burn, a tributary of the River Endrick in its lower reaches. The response of the Nature Conservancy at its Scottish Headquarters in Edinburgh was to dispatch two of its most experienced field officers – Dr. Donald McVean and Dr. Derek Ratcliffe – to make an assessment of the scientific interest of the sites under apparent threat. Further information on the area was forthcoming from a number of sources, including contributions from Professor MFM Meiklejohn (then Vice-Chairman of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club), local naturalist Iain Christie and both the Botany and Zoology Departments of Glasgow University. Now fully committed to the south-east corner of Loch Lomond and adjoining mainland, the Nature Conservancy began negotiations to establish a nature reserve over several of the oak-dominated islands and the mosaic of wetlands which made up the lower flood plain of the River Endrick (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. With some of the finest oak woodland and most diverse wetlands in Scotland, the south-east corner of Loch Lomond was a prime candidate for National Nature Reserve status.

RESERVE ACQUISITION AND DECLARATION

The felling of oak woodland on Inchcailloch prior to house building had already begun when brought to a halt by a Tree Preservation Order issued by Stirling County Council. Unable to progress further with their house building plans, the development company sold Inchcailloch to the Nature Conservancy who had been out-bid the first time the island came on the market. Negotiations for the remainder of the proposed reserve proved protracted, involving as it did four landowners, three tenants and a half-dozen or so claimants for wildfowling rights. As part of the process, all affected parties were required to give their written consent to Nature Reserve Agreements with the Nature Conservancy. At the time agreement could not be reached over the marshes and flood

woodlands on the north side of the River Endrick, and absolute title could not be confirmed for the southern part of the Aber Bogs south of the river. Thanks however to the persistence of the Nature Conservancy's regional officer Tom Huxley and senior land agent John Arbuthnot, nature reserve agreements were finally signed for the remainder of the proposed reserve.

On 4 December 1962, Inchcailloch, Clairinsh, Torrinch, Creinch, Aber Isle and the Mainland (S) – together totalling 624 acres (252.5 ha) – were collectively declared the Loch Lomond Nature Reserve. Although not included in the wording of the declaration, the prefix 'National' was added to the reserve name by common usage from the start. Notices of the declaration appeared in both the *London* and *Edinburgh Gazettes*, although it is unlikely that the general public was familiar with either publication. In practice it fell to Scottish journalists such as Tom Weir and David Stephen to publicise the reserve's existence through their popular wildlife columns. Not until June 1977 was the important 404 acre (163.5 ha) Mainland (N) belatedly added to the Reserve (Fig. 3).

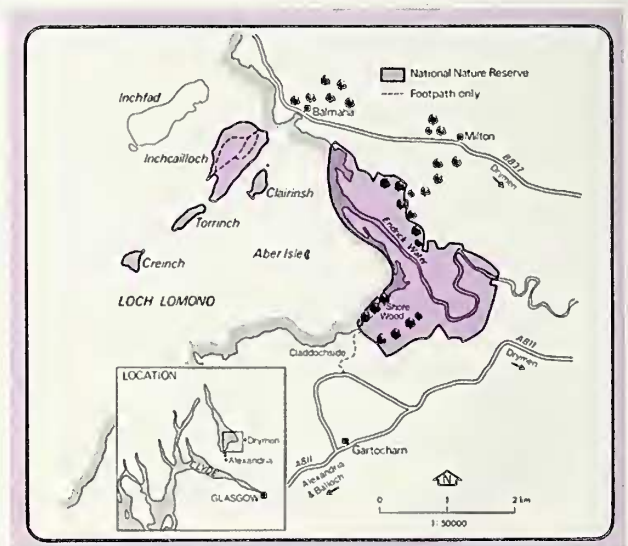


Fig. 3. Map of the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve with the Mainland (N) added.

RESERVE WORKS AND MAINTENANCE

In the early years of the reserve almost all of the estate work was directed towards Inchcailloch, the island's ready accessibility from nearby Balmaha on the mainland attracting all-the-year-round visitor use. Jetties were built and the woodland pathways to the viewpoints, the picnic area and the site of the former parish church and burial ground greatly improved. Having an educational potential, a circular nature trail was laid out linking the island's areas of historical and wildlife interest (Fig. 4). Attention then turned to the Mainland (S), enclosing woodlands from grazing stock, building footbridges and cleaning out overgrown water courses (Fig. 5). As funds became available major projects became

possible, such as embanking the Aber Bogs to give better control over internal water levels.



Fig. 4. The self-guided nature trail on Inchcailloch has been enjoyed by many thousands of visitors over the years.



Fig. 5. Overgrown water courses on the Mainland were cleaned out on rotation.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

A start was made on the gradual removal of past introductions of non-indigenous woody species from the island's oak woodlands, with eradication of the invasive rhododendron *R. ponticum* a priority. On the Mainland (S) the emphasis was placed on the restoration of sedge dominated hay meadows, all traditional management of this wet ground having been abandoned as far back as the agricultural depression of the 1930s (Mitchell, 2000). Turning back the clock was achieved in the species-rich Twenty Acres Meadow by the resumption of annual mowing. For the restoration of the fen vegetation of the drying out Aber Bogs – also formerly cut for sedge hay – the first step was cutting back the colonising willow and birch scrub. This was followed by raising the water table within the embanked area to hold in check the rapidly spreading reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea* (Figs. 6a & 6b).



Fig. 6a. The dominance of reed canary-grass in the Aber Bogs is characteristic of fen vegetation drying out.



Fig. 6b. Raising the water level in the Aber Bogs resulted in a retreat of the reed canary-grass and a resurgence in aquatic sedge growth.

SPECIES SURVEY, MONITORING AND RESEARCH

Species inventories began even before the reserve was declared, outside specialist help being sought with the more difficult plant and animal groups. The intention was to make available descriptive handbooks of the plants, vertebrates and invertebrates of the reserve, but only the first of the three reached the stage of completion. Native flowering plants listed in *The Flora of the Reserve* (Mitchell, 1993) were shown to represent one quarter of the British flora, confirming the varied nature of the area.

As well as the continuing monthly counts of wintering wildfowl (in particular the rare Greenland white-fronted goose *Anser albifrons flavirostris* which had replaced the now lost bean goose), monitoring schemes introduced into the reserve work programme included breeding waders of the Ring Point, the grey heron *Ardea cinerea* colony in Gartfairn Wood, otters *Lutra lutra* on the River Endrick, butterfly populations and the performance of several notable aquatic plants (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The Loch Lomond Dock *Rumex aquaticus* is just one of the reserve's rare species to be subject to long term monitoring. Twenty Acres Meadow.

Almost all of the research which has taken place on the reserve has been directed towards improving species and habitat management. Undertaken for the most part by students and their supervisors from Glasgow, Stirling and Paisley Universities, copies of their project reports were deposited with the library service of the Nature Conservancy (Council).

CHANGES IN THE CONSERVATION AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RESERVE

With the break-up of the Nature Conservancy Council by the government, responsibility for the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve passed to Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) in April 1992. Following on from the creation of the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park in 2002, management of Inchcailloch was taken over by the Park Authority's countryside ranger service in partnership with SNH (Anon, 2008). Further change came in April 2012 when the Mainland (S) was purchased from its private owner by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in partnership with SNH and the National Park Authority, this section of the National Nature Reserve to be known as RSPB Loch Lomond.

POSTSCRIPT

In the absence of any official celebrations in connection with the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve reaching its first half century, to mark the anniversary date in a small way my wife Sandra and I booked a table for a convivial evening at the Oak Tree Inn, Balmaha, the nearest hostelry to the reserve.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX 1

TIMELINE IN THE FIFTY YEAR HISTORY OF THE LOCH LOMOND NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

- 1962 Declaration by the Nature Conservancy on 4 December of the 624 acre (252.5 ha) Loch Lomond Nature Reserve comprising Inchcailloch, Clairinsh, Torrinch, Creinch, Aber Isle and Mainland (S).
- 1963 Warden Naturalist appointed for the reserve.
- 1964 The first Management Plan for the reserve prepared by the Regional Officer.
- 1973 The Nature Conservancy becomes the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC).
- 1976 Waterfowl habitat of the reserve designated under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.
- 1977 Declaration of a 404 acre (163.5 ha) extension on the north side of the River Endrick, bringing the reserve almost in line with the original proposed boundaries.
- 1987 Thirty acres (10 ha) of the southern Aber Bogs finally added to the reserve.
- 1992 NCC (Scot.) merged with the Countryside Commission for Scotland to become Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).
- 2002 The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park established, the reserve falling within the park boundaries.
- 2004 SNH form a partnership with the National Park Authority for the day-to-day management of Inchcailloch.
- 2005 European designations of Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation confirmed for the reserve.
- 2012 The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds purchases the Mainland (S) reserve, forming a management partnership for the area with SNH and the National Park Authority. On 4 December the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve reached its first half century.